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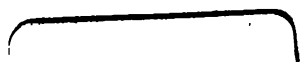
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HOMES OF THE BIRDS



By
Grandfather Percy







**Tark ! how the cheerful birds do chant their lays,
And carol of Love's praise. —SPENSER.**

THE
HOMES OF THE BIRDS;

OR,

Nests and their Builders.

BY

GRANDFATHER PERCY.

"I hear the sound of music sweet
From Birds among the hawthorn-trees."



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THE HOMES OF THE BIRDS.

HE birds of the air have their nests." Yes, like all other animals, the birds have places wherein to shelter themselves and their feathered families, and these places they generally construct with a wonderful amount of skill and ingenuity. It would seem, indeed, that one of the chief objects of their brief existence is to build a home for their offspring, and for their own comfort; and in this great work they exhibit such a variety of accomplishments, and imitate so closely and so cleverly some of the principal branches of human

industry, that we have come to divide them into classes according to their special qualities. Thus, some of our birds are called *Cementers*, because they build up their nests with a kind of cement or mortar; as does, for instance, the American chimney-swallow, which fastens its twigs and bits of wood together with a strong adhesive glue or gum, secreted by glands, one on each side of the back part of its head. Others we name *Felt-making Birds*, such as the chaffinch and goldfinch, of which we shall shortly speak. Then we have the *Dome-Builders*, whose nests are surmounted by a kind of canopy, effectually preventing the rain from making its way into the interior. Nor must we forget the *Tailor-Birds* of the Tropics, which sew large leaves together until they have fashioned a most ingenious habitation. Then there are the *Weavers*, which, like



THE TAILOR-BIRD.

the Baltimore starling, interweave or manufacture a stout, firm kind of cloth, not unlike the substance of a hat in its raw state. *Basket-making Birds* display, in their own peculiar line, quite as signal a dexterity; while the *Mason-Birds*, and the *Carpenter-Birds*, and the *Platform-Builders* (like the ringdove) astonish us by the ease and accuracy with which they execute their work.

I have said that the birds “*imitate* several branches of human industry;”

but I am not sure whether this is the case, and whether *man* may not have imitated *them*. For, no doubt, the Mason-Birds were busy with their mortar and plaster long before any of our forefathers introduced the practice of building houses of cement and stone. However that may be, there is no doubt that we may learn much that is useful from a close examination of the Homes of the Birds. We may learn a lesson of prudence and industry and perseverance, at all events; and we may learn, too, to look beyond the Mason-Birds and the Carpenter-Birds and the Weaver-Birds to Him who created them, to Him who endowed them with their remarkable faculties of instinct and foresight, to Him who suffers not a sparrow to fall to the ground without His knowledge.

I shall confine myself, in this little book, to a description of the Homes



A MASON-BIRD.

of British Birds and their Builders :
on future occasions, I shall hope to
speak to you respecting the brilliant
birds of the Tropics, the birds of
America, and the wild, strange birds
that haunt the iron-bound cliffs and
the gray sea-shore.

In Great Britain, the birds begin
to build their homes in the sweet and
merry spring, when the earth is re-
covering from its long winter sleep,
and the flowers and grasses are rapidly
spreading themselves over the active

soil, and the trees are budding into leaf on every bough and spray. It is then they mate together, and each prudent couple hastens to provide a suitable asylum and shelter for their coming offspring.

Among British birds, one of the most interesting builders is the *Woodpecker*, a very fair specimen of the carpenter tribe, and as diligent and persevering a worker as you will wish to meet with. He is worth describing, and, in truth, if I did *not* describe him, you would not understand how he works. In the first place, let us look at his implement or tool : it consists of a strong, solid bill, about two inches in length, shaped something like a wedge, and of a dark brown colour. Next, observe that his tongue is furnished towards the tip with numerous fibres, of the size of minute



THE WOODPECKER.

hairs, arranged like the bristles of a brush ; their use you will find out presently. The outer circle of the eye is white, surrounding another of red ; the top of the head, a bright red, extending down the hinder part of the neck, and terminating in a point behind. A similar streak of crimson points downward from each corner of the bill. The back and upper wing-feathers are of a splendid olive-green ; the under parts of the body, white, slightly tinged with emerald ; and the

tail, like the wings, is striped with bars of colour.

Such is the woodpecker. Now for the way he builds :—

“ With shrill and oft-repeated cry,
His regular course, alternate rise and fall,
The woodpecker prolongs. Then, to the trunk
Close clinging, with unwearied beak assails
The hollow bark ; through every cell his strokes
Roll the dire echoes that from wintry sleep
Awake his insect prey. The alarmed tribes
Start from each chink that bores the mouldering
stem :
Their scattered flight, *with lengthened tongue*, the
foe
Pursues : joy glistens on his verdant plumes,
And brighter scarlet sparkles on his crest.”

In these lines the poet very accurately describes the woodpecker's mode of working ; but, I think, my young readers will not object to fuller particulars. Well, then, the bird has very little power of flight, and his movement from tree to tree seems a labour and a difficulty to him. But from tree to tree he *must* go, until he has found one suitable for his purpose.



THE WOODPECKER AT WORK.

He then settles down on the bole or trunk, at a few feet above the ground, using his claws to keep himself fixed and steady. Beginning at a point below the *lowest large branch*, he slowly but surely works upwards ; now tapping with his bill, so as to frighten the insects from their hiding-places ; now pecking holes in a rotten branch, that he may reach the prey concealed within it ; and now projecting his long, stretchable, hair-tipped tongue, to sweep the insects off the

surface. For this is the particular use of the tongue I am describing to you ; and, believe me, no insect once caught in its small fibres can hope to make its escape. The tongue, when loaded, is drawn backward, and its captures lodged in the woodpecker's stomach !

But, remember, he is doing something more than insect-catching. Having discovered a suitable spot for commencing operations, he cuts out a hole in the solid wood, which is as perfectly circular as if it had been first measured with a pair of compasses. Then he works downward, in a slanting direction, for some six or eight inches ; and, afterwards, vertically, for ten or twelve more. As thus :—

 The opening is just large enough
 to admit the body of the bird,
 but inside, the apartment and its
 passage are roomy, spacious, and as



WATCHING AND WAITING.

smooth as if it had been planed by a clever carpenter. No doubt this is hard work, and the male is sometimes relieved at it by his spouse ; the pair regularly carrying away their chips, and strewing them at a distance, so as to prevent suspicion. The interest shown by the female is very great, and seems to inspire her mate to redoubled exertions : she frequently visits the “nursery,” and examines every part of it with the most careful attention. She then deposits a couch of saw-

dust at the bottom, takes possession of it, and, in due time, lays her eggs, which are generally six in number, and of a pure white colour.

I daresay the first thought which will occur to your mind in reading the above description is, that the woodpecker must be a very destructive bird, if he bores holes in trees in this easy and independent fashion.

But please to remember that he never burrows into *sound* timber. He seeks the decaying bark which swarms with insects—insects that would soon eat into the heart of the tree, and render it worthless—and he carefully removes every foreign substance growing upon the trunk, and likely to injure it. We may, therefore, admire the ingenious carpentry of the woodpecker without any fear that his work is harmful.

It is well the reader should under-



A SWARM OF BIRDS.

stand that but for the birds we should be overrun with insects, which would destroy our fruit, eat up our crops, and render even our lives unbearable. In France, where the massacre of small birds has been carried to a shameful extent, the farmer now suffers from a plague of insects, and is glad to import the feathered friends he formerly exterminated. The birds are the allies of man, and to treat them cruelly is to do harm to our own interests. But as man never will-

ingly does *this*, it is evident that his persecution of the winged race is due to his ignorance quite as much as to any innate love of what is called sport.

To destroy the insect is the peculiar task of the bird—its great mission ; and hundreds and thousands of finches and flycatchers, kingfishers and linnets, wrens and robins, thrushes and tits, are constantly waging war against our tiny but formidable foes.

Speaking of tits, I am reminded of the *Long-tailed Titmouse*; and as she is a most dexterous nest-builder, I am thus brought back to the subject of the present volume—the Homes of the Birds.

The long-tailed titmouse is a pretty little bird, and she and her mate generally fly about with a little flock of *ten or twelve*—the others being their



THE LONG-TAILED TITMOUSE.

brood. They prey upon the saw-flies which are so destructive to our gooseberries, accomplishing their task at early dawn, before you and I, my friends, are out of bed. Their nest is almost as beautiful in form as they are: it is a dome-shaped nest, and constructed both by male and female, the one working *inside*, and the other *out*. They employ for materials all kinds of mosses, wool, hair, and the like—binding them together with the webs of spiders, and the silk which they

plunder from the cocoons or coverings of caterpillars. The whole being woven into a firm and smooth substance is incrustated with lichens or fir-apples, and suspended to a strong branch, or hidden deep within a gorse-bush, looking as little like a nest as you can imagine. The opening by which the birds enter or go out is made on one side of the oval or purse shaped structure, and near the top. Inside, at the bottom, is placed a couch of soft downy feathers ; and in this the titmouse lays her eggs, which are generally ten to twelve in number, and singularly small and delicate.

From the titmouse I turn to the *Goldfinch*, a bird better known, I doubt not, to my readers. He is a handsome, lively fellow, of sportive and engaging ways, and with a sweet, melodious song. The Scotch poet,



THE GOLDFINCH.

Robert Burns, justly calls him “music’s gayest child ;” and on account of the excellence of his strain, the beauty of his plumage, his docility, and his surprising talents, he is a favourite chamber-bird. But, for my own part, I cannot endure to cage and confine my feathered friends. I love to see them enjoying the delights of liberty, hovering about my windows, or fluttering from tree to tree in my garden. And I would rather admire the goldfinch in the elegant home he builds

for himself and his spouse, than in the most gorgeous cage which ever glittered in a lady's drawing-room.

" Hid among the opening flowers
Of the earliest vernal bowers,
Passing there the anxious hours
In her little mossy dome,
Sits his mate, while he is singing,
Or across the lawn is winging,
Or upon a thistle swinging,
Gleaning for his happy home."

The " little mossy dome " is a perfect wonder of lightness and grace. It is made of wool, hair, mosses, and vegetable fibres, which are felted together most ingeniously, so that not a single projection or ruggedness impairs the smoothness of the outer surface. The sides are lined internally with the down of colt's-foot, or cotton-wool, or the down of willows and can-nach; and the bottom is made cosy and comfortable with tiny tufts of the finest wool. The exquisitely-wrought structure, when completed, hangs from



NEST OF THE GOLDFINCH.

the pliant spray of the plane tree, almost hidden by the largeness of its foliage ; or it is buried in a luxuriant hedge, or leafy thicket,

“ Surmounted by the flowers
Of climbing vetch and honeysuckle wild.”

The goldfinch is a felt-making bird, and so is the *Chaffinch*. You will think, perhaps, that “felt-making” is not a proper term to employ. The resemblance of the texture of their nests to that of a hat or a piece of

“ double milled woollen cloth ” may not have occurred to you, because the most compact of these nests seems loose when compared with the said hat or cloth. But examine them closely, and you will find that the materials are arranged in a very similar manner, being, as it were, *carded* into one another, and not *interwoven* thread by thread, or hair by hair.

It is easy to describe the *general* construction of the nest of the chaffinch, but, nevertheless, no two nests are exactly alike. Some birds make use of the fine green moss which grows on trees ; others, of small gray or yellow lichens ; others, of lichens and spiders' webs ; and others, again, of small tufts of cotton-wool. They take, in fact, the materials that lie near to hand ; but whatever these may be, they invariably work them up in the same manner. *Wool* is always in-



THE CHAFFINCH.

dispensable ; and with this wool they “carefully and neatly” felt the other materials into a smooth, even, and tenacious texture, extraordinarily smooth and regular when newly finished. Sometimes the nest is also bound round with dry grass stems, as if to keep it more compact ; and it is always fixed in its place among the branches by twining bands of moss. The inside is lined with hair and feathers, so arranged as to form a kind of hollow for the bird’s beau-

tifully-spotted eggs. The favourite trees with the chaffinch are tall hawthorns, silver firs, elders, crab-trees, and the like. He has also a partiality for gardens and apple-trees, and will build against a wall or a grape-vine—that is, in some leafy corner, or in the fork of a tree or bush, where his home cannot be easily discovered, and is comparatively safe from the attacks of enemies.

A nest more readily detected, but not always very easy to obtain, is that of the *Swallow*. Yet she lives so short a time with us, that we may well wonder she takes the trouble to build herself a substantial home. However, she has a reason for it, as you will by-and-by understand.

I should like to talk to you a long time about the swallow, for she is one of my greatest favourites, as she was



THE SWALLOW.

of Sir Humphry Davy, who looked upon her as a worthy rival of the nightingale ; for if the latter cheered the *sense of hearing*, the former delighted the *sense of seeing*. It is very beautiful, I think, to see the white-bosomed bird, with her keen swift wings, darting through the air like an arrow, or wheeling round and round in mazy circles which almost make you dizzy. How rapidly she flies ! and how incessantly ! At the rate of a mile a minute, it is said, and for

ten hours every day ; so that if she lives ten years, in that period she must travel over TWO MILLION ONE HUNDRED AND NINETY THOUSAND MILES. Can you realize these figures ? They are equal to a voyage round the world repeated EIGHT AND SEVENTY TIMES.

Then, again, I like the swallow because she is the herald of spring. She leaves our cold climate when the dark days come in ; but so sure as the trees begin to put on their leafy dress, and the flowers to lift their tiny heads, and the hedgerows to bud and bloom under the influence of a genial sun, so surely does she make her reëpppearance ; returning on nearly the same day every successive year, and returning always to her old familiar haunts. And this is the reason why she builds a home among us ; for she intends it to be a permanent one, and year after year reoccupies it, if not disturbed.



A FLIGHT OF SWALLOWS.

Now, there are several kinds of swallows ; as, for instance, the common house or chimney swallow, the barn swallow, the cliff swallow, the window swallow, the sand martin, the purple martin, and many others. To talk about all these and their homes would occupy too much of my space. I shall confine myself, therefore, to the *House Swallow* and the *Sand Martin*.

The *House Swallow* measures about six inches in length. His bill is black ;

his chin and forehead are of a deep chestnut red ; his black tail is tinged with green ; the top of his head, and all the upper parts of his body, may be described as of a purplish-black in colour, like old port wine ; the upper part of the breast is black, but the lower part and belly are beautifully white. The legs are of a dusky hue, but in shape are very fine and delicate ; the tail is long and much forked, divided, as it were, into a couple of branches.

You will judge from these particulars, if you have not seen him, that our swallow is a handsome and elegantly proportioned bird, and that his shape is well adapted for flying. He is so made as literally to *cut* the air. As I have said, he is almost constantly on the wing, wheeling and skimming in every direction ; now taking a straight downward flight, and now sweeping



THE HOUSE SWALLOW'S NEST.

round in an airy curve ; and whenever in his course meeting with an insect, also on the wing, opening wide his bill, snapping up his prey, and making very short work of it.

His nest is composed of a crust or shell of clay or mud, mixed with short bits of straw and hair to render it tough and permanent. He mixes the materials, and afterwards flattens and hardens them, with his bill ; and sometimes half a dozen swallows will assist in the construction of a single

nest. It is open at the top, and in shape may be compared to a deep dish; inside it is lined with fine grasses and feathers, which are worked up together with much address.

The home of the chimney or house swallow differs very little, I may observe, from that of the window swallow, only the shell of the latter is shallower and hemispheric in shape—that is, it may be compared to the half of a hollow globe or ball. Both varieties of swallows derive their distinctive or specific names from the localities in which they love to build; the former selecting a chimney not in use, but next, if possible, to the kitchen or some equally warm shaft; the latter building his nest in the corners of windows and under eaves. He does not always find there a very secure situation; for the heavy rains of August will often moisten the earth




THE WINDOW SWALLOW'S NEST.

of which the nest is built ; the mortar or cement then fails ; and away go the home and its tenants, dashed upon the ground. Yet, year after year, the bird will build in the same spot.

As punctually as the swallow visits us in the spring does she leave us in the autumn. When the cold winds of September days, and the bitter frosts of September nights, kill off the insects on which she feeds, she and her congeners congregate in immense flocks, and suddenly the nests

are empty, the old roosting-places deserted, and you see the dark clouds hurrying far away, bound for the warm south or south-east, to the olive-groves of Italy, or across the sea to the pomegranates and citrons of Africa. On the way hundreds fall victims to their numerous enemies, or are overtaken by Alpine storms; yet, in many places, the same pair of swallows contrive to accomplish the journey to and fro, and year after year, with an astonishing regularity.

Let me now direct your attention to the *Sand Martin*, one of the smallest of our swallows, which dwells in little communities along steep and sandy banks, in quarries, or on the low cliffs washed by river-waters, mining or excavating long and deep tunnels in which to shelter themselves and their brood. The sand martin is very small,





THE SAND MARTIN.

and from his size you would think him wholly unfitted for the arduous work he undertakes : but the claws with which he clings to the face of the bank, while making his home, are sharp and tenacious ; and the bill with which he bores into the hard sand is short, solid, amazingly keen, and provided with a fine tapering point. It is therefore well fitted to be used as the sand martin uses it, for a pickaxe.

If he can find a soft, sandy spot, the wise bird is by no means anxious to

give himself unnecessary trouble, and willingly works away at the soft material, which crumbles readily at his slightest touch. If no such advantage offers, however, he applies himself to his more laborious enterprise with the utmost energy. Having tested various places with his beak and fixed upon one, he fastens his claws securely in the rock, and by turning round and round, and pecking as he turns, he soon excavates a tolerably round tunnel or gallery, which he carries inwards for about two feet and a half in a slightly slanting direction. Generally the burrow is worked in a straight line; but if a stone or the root of a tree come in the way, the bird avoids it by making a curve or bend.

At the end of the tunnel or gallery, which is always larger than the shaft or passage conducting into it, is placed



THE SAND MARTIN'S BURROWS.

the nest ; a very simple affair, indeed, for it consists of nothing more than loose hay, with a few of the smaller breast feathers of geese, ducks, or fowls, spread out for the reception of the eggs.

Here I take leave of the swallows. What noise is that I hear above my head ? Who can fail to recognize the hoarse cry of the *Rook* ? And, looking up, I see the blue sky darkened by a long flight of birds as black as

jet,—all flying in a kind of military order, with skirmishers in front and in rear to give warning of the approach of any enemy.

They are handsome and sagacious birds—the rooks; with quick, keen eyes, that seem always on the watch. Their habits are singularly interesting; for they are endowed with a degree of foresight and instinct that almost approaches to reason. They are remarkable, also, for their gregariousness; that is, for their love of society. In flocks they build their nests, so that every tree in a wood or plantation will be thick with them; in flocks they seek for food; and in flocks, after a day's excursion, they return to their lofty homes.

It is observable, as Waterton has pointed out, that in their morning and evening migrations, the height at which they fly seems to be regulated



THE ROOK.

by the condition of the weather. If the wind is blowing violently, they swiftly descend into the valley, and as they sweep along, do but just skim the tops of the tallest trees ; but on a calm, clear evening, you may see them on their homeward way, at such an elevation in the heavens that they look like a floating cloud of black specks.

So far as his home is concerned, the rook belongs to the Basket-making Birds. He first lays down a foundation of sticks of all kinds and sizes,—

the dead branches blown from the trees by the winds of the preceding winter. These he weaves in and out of the sprays and twigs of the bough on which he intends to rest, until he has fashioned a strong though not very elegant imitation of basket-work. Then, for internal lining, he collects a quantity of long and delicate fibrous roots, knitting them closely together until they form an inner basket, which a dexterous hand may even lift out of the external one. Here, in security, lie the eggs, which are four or five in number, and variable in colour; the general tint, however, being a greenish gray, which is blotted and spotted, and splashed and dashed, with a dark greenish brown.

The rook bestows considerable thought on the selection of a suitable *position* for his nest. It is not all parts of a tree that will suit his purpose, as



ROOKS BUILDING A NEST.

some branches may not be sufficiently forked, others may be dangerously weak, and others too much exposed to the influence of the wind. Before building, therefore, you will see the male and female, for some days, closely examining all the trees of the grove or rookery ; and when they have chosen a branch that seems fit for their purpose, they will sit upon it, and watch it very vigilantly, for another two or three days. And it may happen, after all, that they have

fixed upon a place too near the mansion of an older pair, and so soon as they commence operations they find themselves attacked, and, as a matter of course, defeated. Or, being lazy and dishonest, instead of searching for sticks in a suitable manner, they pilfer them from any nest they find unguarded. At last they are detected. The plundered birds complain to the heads of the community, and the plunderers are punished. Eight or ten rooks simultaneously swoop down on the new nest, so dishonestly built, and pull it to pieces.

But, at last, the young birds, learning that honesty is the best policy, set industriously to work. While one flies in quest of materials the other sits upon the tree, and guards the gradually-accumulating pile ; and in the space of three or four days, interrupted by an occasional skirmish,



IN THE ROOKERY.

a commodious nest is constructed. The female begins to lay, and thenceforth peace prevails; not one of the whole rookery attempting to molest the couple that have become regular and respectable members of their grave community.

The two great songsters of spring are the Lark and the Nightingale. We know their supreme excellence as musicians. Let us glance for a moment at their acquirements as build-

ers. It would seem as if among birds as among men it is not given to any to shine in more than one capacity.

There is little to interest or astonish us in the lowly home of the *Lark*. Though he flies to "heaven's gate" to pour out his bursts of melody, he builds his nest on the ground; builds it of the commonest materials, and contents himself with partially hiding it in the furrow of a ploughed field, or in the open meadow, with only a clod of turf to shelter it. This contrast between the humble character of the bird's habitation and the aspiring nature of its flight has necessarily attracted the attention of our poets and thinkers. Thus, Waller speaks of

"The lark that shuns on lofty boughs to build
Her annual nest....

*Singing she mounts; her airy wings are stretched
Towards heaven, as if from heaven her notes
she fetched."*



THE LARK AT REST.

Milton says,—

“ And now the herald lark
Left his ground-nest, high-towering to descry
The morn’s approach, and greet her with his song.”

The nest of the *Nightingale* seems, in like manner, unworthy of so glorious a singer. She imitates the lark in humility. It is true that she does not build *upon* the ground, but she builds very *near* it; only a few inches above its surface; planting her nest under thick-growing foliage, in the most remote and secluded corners she can discover, in places where you

would never expect a bird to build. It is evident that the nightingale's whole heart is in her song. She has no time to devote to the construction of a splendid mansion. Her only objects are concealment and safety; and, therefore, she mixes up the straw, grass, dried leaves, and twigs of which she builds her nest in so careless a fashion that you would scarcely suppose the *thing* so constructed to be a *nest*.

From a bird that builds a bad or indifferent nest, we naturally pass to a bird that builds *no* nest at all! This is the case with that well-known visitor, the *Cuckoo*; a visitor, I say, because, like the swallow, she comes in spring to abandon us in autumn. In a book devoted to "Homes of the Birds" we cannot say much about a *bird that* seems happy without a



THE NIGHTINGALE'S EVENING SONG.

home!—about a bird that makes use of other birds' nests; just as if somebody came from the next street, and planted himself and family in your father's house instead of his own!

It must be confessed that naturalists differ widely in their statements about the cuckoos, whose habits are not very easily observed, on account of their shy retiring nature. But it seems agreed that the hen-bird builds no nest, and does not hatch her own eggs; but goes prying about in search

of the nest of a titlark, a water-wagtail, or a hedge-sparrow; and while either of these is laying her eggs, which occupies from four to six days, Mistress Cuckoo pops *her* egg in among the rest, and away she goes with a mind quite free and easy.

But she frequently leaves bad consequences behind her. The hedge-sparrow, while sitting, not only throws out, at times, some of her own eggs—to make room, I suppose, for the intruder—but injures others in so serious a degree that they become addled. The *intrusive* egg, however, she neither ejects nor injures.

I have something still **more** distressing to add. No sooner have the young cuckoo and the young sparrows emerged from their shells than the latter are coolly turned out of their home by the impudent stranger. The *way* in which the cuckoo does this



THE CUCKOO.

bold stroke of business is very ingenious. Soon after he is hatched, and while still blind, he contrives with his wings and tail, or stump of a tail, to lift the young hedge-sparrow, or the half-hatched egg, upon his back, which seems shaped expressly for the purpose. Then, making a resting-place for his burden by elevating his shoulders, he clambers backward with it up the side of the nest until he reaches the top, where, resting for a moment, he jerks away his load ; and

then, after feeling about with the tips of his wings as if to make sure that he has quite got rid of his victim, he contentedly drops back into the nest again.

The *Wren* is a small bird, and she builds a small nest; but this nest is one of much ingenuity and elegance in construction. It is usually placed under the brow of a river's bank, where the sand has been worn away by the water, so as to leave the turf overhanging it. Sometimes it will be found among the thick ivy which covers an old tree or mouldering wall; or you may discover it under the "protecting side of a haystack," or in the snug shelter afforded by a cottage-eave.

The material of which the nest is composed is, generally, green moss. *This* the wren collects in large



THE WREN'S NEST.

quantities; and as if to save herself the trouble of many journeys, she may be seen loaded with a tuft of moss as big as herself! When she proposes to build on the bare clay of a streamlet's bank, or the moss-grown trunk of a tree, she first describes, like a good artist, an oval outline of the intended structure, by glueing with saliva little bits of moss all round, taking care to make her outline narrower at the top than at the bottom.

An agreeable writer says that instead of fastening the *back* of her nest to the clay, our wren sometimes fixes only the arched *top* to that support, the under part of the nest being built downwards, and allowed to hang, like a finch's nest, from the branch of a tree. This foundation, as we may call it,—since it is the part of the nest first built,—is enlarged by the insertion of fresh pieces, apparently glued with saliva, until a large dome or hemisphere is constructed, about twenty times the dimensions of its little builder, and with a small oval hole in the side for an entrance. Sometimes almost the sole material employed by the wren is moss, the lining as well as the outside being composed of it; but I think that, as a rule, some straws, dead leaves, and bits of twig are used to bind *the moss* externally; while, internally,



THE GOLDEN-CRESTED WREN.

it is lined with hair or wool, cotton, worsted, feathers, down, or any similar substance which is easily procurable in the neighbourhood. Altogether, the domed nest of the wren is a very artful and remarkable structure.

Another dome-builder, let me tell you, is that comparatively rare bird, the *Golden-crested Wren*. "A minute creature," says a quaint writer, "and perfectly unmindful of any severity in our winter, she hatches her young

in June, the warmer portion of our year, and yet builds her beautiful nest with the utmost attention to warmth. Interweaving small branches of moss with the web of the spider, she forms a closely compacted texture, nearly an inch in thickness; lining it with such a profusion of feathers that, sinking deep into the downy accumulation, she seems almost lost when sitting; and her young, when hatched, appear stifled with the warmth of their bedding, and the heat of their apartment."

There are many curious particulars connected with the *Kingfisher's* home. Of course, as this beautiful bird frequents the water-side, and feeds upon the fish which she dexterously catches with her long and pointed bill, you will expect to find her nest *in the bank* of some pleasant pool or



NEST OF THE KINGFISHER.

running brook. When she and her mate begin to think of building a home, they wander about the water-side until they find the deserted burrow of a water-vole, or a water-shrew, or some other burrowing animal. Then they enlarge it to suit themselves, always being careful to select a burrow that slants upwards, so that their nest may be kept dry, however high the water rises.

To obtain a kingfisher's nest at all is a most difficult task, and to obtain it in

a perfect state is still more difficult. In fact, so far as I can learn, the only perfect specimen known in England was procured by Mr. Gould, the eminent naturalist, and is now preserved in the British Museum. It is composed entirely of—what do you think?—*fish-bones*, minnows furnishing the greater portion! These bones are ejected by the bird after she has digested the flesh. The sides of the nest measure half an inch to three-quarters of an inch in thickness, and its form is very flat. “The circular shape, and slight hollow,” we are told, “show that the bird *really* forms the mass of bones into a nest, and does not merely lay her eggs at random upon the ejected matter.”

I pass from the kingfisher to a much commoner bird, the *Song-Thrush*; which, if he cannot boast of



THE SONG-THRUSH.

the splendid plumage of the former, rivets our admiration by the liquid melody of his strain. He deserves our attention, moreover, as an ingenious architect, his home being really a very admirable specimen of good masonry. The situations which he loves to choose are graphically described by a modern poet in a passage well worth quoting :—

“ In the hazel bush or sloe is formed
The habitation of the wedded pair ;
Sometimes below the never-fading leaves
Of ivy close, that overtwisting binds,

And richly crowns, with clustering fruit of spring,
Some river-rock, or nodding castle-wall;
Sometimes beneath the jutting root of elm,
Or oak, among the sprigs that overhang
A pebble-chiding stream, the loam-lined house
Is fixed, well hid from ken of hovering hawk,
Or lurking beast, or schoolboy's prowling eye."

Now it is very true that these are favourite localities with the song-thrush; but it is equally true that he frequently builds his nest in far less romantic and difficult places, and we are almost inclined to believe that he is not so fastidious on this point as some naturalists represent. At all events, in my own garden, a pair of song-thrushes have planted their nest in a hedge, which is certainly closely-grown and luxuriant, but which is by no means concealed from sight, or safe from "school-boy's prowling eye." Let me add that the poet above quoted is decidedly wrong in speaking of the nest as "loam-lined." I have *examined* several, and have never



THE SONG-THRUSH'S NEST.

found loam entering into their composition.

To adapt the elaborate description of Mr. Rennie to the purpose of this little volume, I may begin by saying that the interior of these nests in shape and size resembles a large breakfast tea-cup, being as uniformly rounded, and, though not polished, almost as smooth. In constructing this cup the parent birds first lay a solid foundation of moss, chiefly the more fertile and fern-leaved mosses ;

any kind, in fact, which is sufficiently tufted. As the work advances, the tufts of moss are wrought into a rounded wall by means of grass stems, wheat, straw, or roots; which are twisted with it and with one another up to the very brim of the cup, where a thicker band of the same materials is hooped round like the mouth of a basket. The circular form of this framework is produced by the bird measuring it, at every step of the process, with its body, particularly the part extending from the thigh to the chin; and when any of the straw, or other materials, will not readily conform to this standard, they are carefully glued into their proper place by means of saliva,—a circumstance visible in many parts of the same nest, if closely examined.

The shell, or framework, being *thus* completed, the bird begins



A CHORUS OF BIRDS.

the internal masonry by spreading pellets of horse or cow dung on the basket-work of moss and straw, beginning at the bottom, which is intended to be the thickest, and proceeding gradually from the central point. This material, however, from its dryness, would not adhere if the birds did not employ their saliva; yet the little architect must possess no ordinary gift of patience to lay it on so smoothly with no other implement than its little narrow-pointed bill.

Our best workmen, I expect, would shrink from such a task with such a tool!

Here I must pause. Grandfather Percy has told his tale; and heartily does he hope that his young readers will bear in mind the lessons of patience, industry, and foresight always to be gained from a careful study of

THE HOMES OF THE BIRDS.



